

Madam Chair, members of the committee: My name is Patricia Dahl (D-A-H-L) and I am the Head Start Director for RMDC and we are funded to serve 248 children and their families in L&C, Broadwater and Jefferson counties. As a State we served nearly 5,500 children from 4,961 families. I am here today to offer support for Representative Edie McClafferty's bill, HB 369, which would establish procedures for granting each HS and EHS program \$300 per enrolled child.

Head Start is the premier Early Childhood Education program and has been serving children and families since 1965. What sets Head Start and Early Head Start apart from other early childhood programs is its comprehensive approach to working with children and families. Head Start's high quality preschool education may be what draws people into Head Start but it is then that we can begin helping families gain access to services that will strengthen their family unit and support them on a path of self-sufficiency.

Head Start/EHS offers children access to health, dental, and mental health care, provides them daily meals, helps them understand the importance of handwashing and toothbrushing. Children, like all of us, learn better when their bodies and minds are healthy and appropriately nourished. Head Start helps children develop relationships, learn self-control, gain self-esteem; Head Start not only helps children get ready for school, Head Start helps children get ready for life!! Research has provided us with data that shows children who have access to quality early childhood education have better high school graduation rates, do better economically, have less adolescent pregnancy, have less incarceration, are employed and pay taxes rather than receive welfare, own a home, and so on. Supporting early childhood education saves money down the road...early intervention via HS/EHS means less children needing special education services when they enter public school. I do believe research has shown that money invested in high quality early childhood education programs for low income children gives a 16% rate of return on the investment....***now that is an investment!***

To continue more on the comprehensiveness of HS/EHS...Head Start family advocates and social workers help families by connecting them to their communities and help them access services to better meet their family needs. Head Start/EHS helps families recognize their strengths and build on their strengths; it helps families look at setting goals and realistic ways to reach those goals.

Head Start/EHS helps educate families just as it helps educate young children. Programs provide information and classes on child development, attachment and bonding, appropriate parenting techniques, financial literacy and budgeting, nutrition, and behavior management, to name a few. Parent involvement is one of the cornerstones of Head Start and we encourage parent participation at every level...from observing in classrooms to serving in leadership capacities on the parent policy council.

Head Start and Early Head Start works with children of all abilities and disabilities. Ten percent of our openings must be for children with disabilities...and it's a very good chance most serve up to 20-25% children with disabilities. And the families Head Start serves are very low income...90% of the children we serve must be from a family at or below 100% of poverty to qualify for Head Start....for a family of 4 they would need to make \$21,200 or less to qualify.

People who work for Head Start and Early Head Start are dedicated to helping make a difference. Did you know the average teacher in a Head Start/EHS classroom in Montana makes \$19,017 per year? And family advocates have a caseload of 50+?

Head Start has been flat funded the past 6-7 years...our federal funding has remained constant while our operating costs, like yours, have continued to soar. We are behind about 13-16% in our funding. It would take \$940 per child to catch Head Start up for the years of being flat funded. Many of us are looking at the possibility of reducing services to families or even the number of children we serve because we are facing budget deficits. Do you know how much it troubles us to think of having to ask for a reduction in children so we can pay for utilities, purchase food and supplies, and pay for insurance when many of us have waiting lists of children and families needing and qualifying for our programs?

In closing, again I would ask for your support for HB 369. Help us continue to provide comprehensive services to the neediest of the needy in Montana. We are not asking for a hand out....we are asking for a hand up. Thank you for hearing my testimony today.